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taking the left to task

Dan Raphael

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INTRO

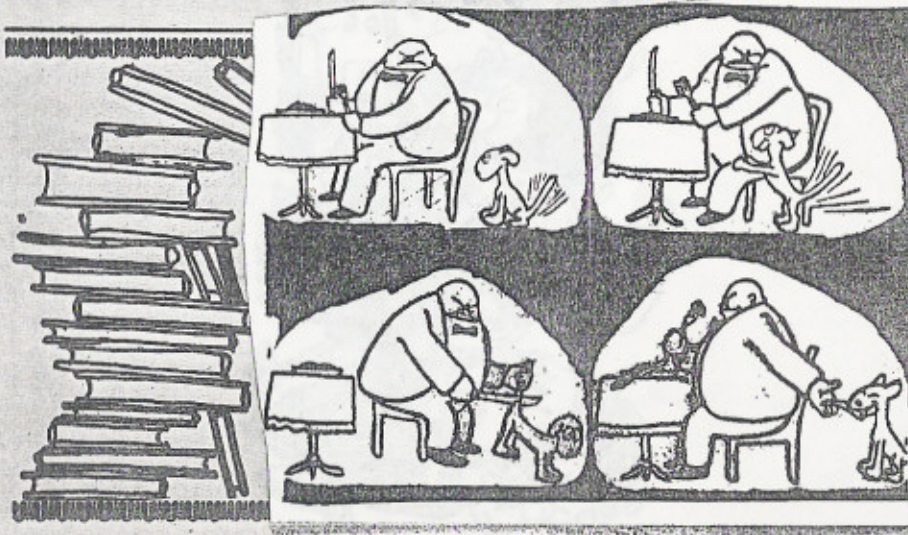
For eight years I have been active in the American Left, in one form or another. In that time I have met many people and experienced many different situations that, cumulatively, have gone to build in me the conviction that the Left is largely irrelevant to real human problems.

What is needed in our society and in our world is an approach to the human problems of life and relationship that is not hide-bound with tradition, hopelessly clad in rhetoric, and formulated from doctrines instead of discovered in the truths of everyday experience. Any attempt to understand and solve the conflicts that engulf us which proceeds from the attitude that, if reality does not conform to the High Dogma of this or that "revolutionary" sect, then reality must be appropriately amputated so as to fit within the neat confines of Vanguard Church catechism, is bound to provide us with more problems--not solutions.

TAKING THE LEFT TO TASK is composed of two letters. "Letter to the Movement" originally appeared in Liberation magazine, and the "Letter to SRAF" first appeared in the Bulletin of the Social-Revolutionary Anarchist Federation. Both articles subsequently appeared together in Revolutionary Anarchist magazine, from which this pamphlet is taken.

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life. I saw in myself and my comrades the same acquisitiveness, competitiveness, petty jealousy, self-estrangement and intimidation that I saw everywhere around me in the form of capitalism.

I'll cite just one more example, although there are many to choose from. For eight years I've known a fellow who recently joined the Communist Party in Tacoma. He had always prided himself on being an independent and fearless thinker, so I found it ludicrous and sad when he felt called upon to telephone his higher-up in the party for directions. His question?: "Would it be alright to insert the word 'a' into an article?" The article in question described a man as being of a particular Indian tribe, but without the article 'a' before the tribe. I pointed out that this was grammatically correct, but he felt called upon to check with his boss before making this insignificant move.

So we see that obedience to authority and ultra-bureaucracy are also the products of organizations based upon leader/follower dichotomies. Every organization I've seen and belonged to perpetuated this sort of anti-liberatory value-system and structure, including many I have not mentioned. The present is the seed of the future; in what we do today is contained the embryo of tomorrow.

The fact of the matter is that when the organizations we create are structured with hierarchical power avenues, we're building for a future class society. When we contribute to an atmosphere of academic imperiousness, in which we must cultivate a cult of well-read infallibility that robs us of our vulnerability and tenderness, we are creating and sustaining a value-system based on deceit and macho-politics.

There was a saying that used to be popular in early SDS, before it too became another assembly-line for little Leninist wind-up toys. It is a saying that, I think, sums up well what our attitude must be if we are ever to know the reality of freedom: "Revolution is about our lives!"

There is only one revolution, and it is total.

Dan Raphael
Portland, Oregon

DUCTION

This holds true with anarchist thought, as with any other. If we content ourselves with learning from books and citing the lore of this or that proclaimed authority, then we shall simply be adding to the already enormous stockpile of wasted effort and useless verbalization. The effort of these articles which follow is to provide the reader with a human--that is, personal/experiential--backdrop for the analysis they contain. What is needed, I feel, is not pompous abstracts, but vision and action rooted in the actual affairs of daily life: the unspectacular realities of work, school and leisure portrayed in their unvarnished commonness.

The world is overburdened with arrogant Priests masquerading as revolutionaries---meglomaniacs whose real creed everywhere is power, and whose dedication--despite their rhetoric about "serving the people"--is only in becoming the new ruling elite. Accordingly, I hope the reader will, as with anything written or spoken, regard what follows as being, at most, one person's attempt to uncover the shape of the truth. I would consider it a failure indeed to be thought an authority; let that category be reserved for the small-time tyrants who yearn for the Big-Time.

Dan Raphael
18 July, 1973
Portland, Oregon

Letter to the Movement

I want to share briefly with you an account of just a few of many experiences I've had while active in the movement. They are only now falling into place in terms of my own consciousness. A pattern emerges, and it is a pattern that I find widespread among the rival organizations of the left.

After several years of belonging to various organizations with which I had no real contact, I was recruited to the Young Socialist Alliance. I had some reservations about the organization but was told, "If you find you disagree, you can always quit later." There were a number of things that began to bother me: the children of a couple who were leading members of our branch seemed unhappy; the little girl was treated gruffly by her father. I recall writing a poem about the incident at the time, it disturbed me so much. The little girl's tears seemed to say more to me about the future than our discussion groups and *Militant* sales drives.

The way another comrade liked to order people around bothered me. I thought of Stalin. But what could I say? He didn't do anything, so far as I was aware, that was formally wrong.

I recall asking another comrade, Jon, whether we couldn't recruit homosexual people to our organization. I did not know at the time of Y.S.A.'s exclusion policy against gay people, and he didn't volunteer to tell me about it. Instead, his response was, "It's too bad about the way they're treated, but we just can't have them in the organization. The working class just wouldn't under-

stand."

Our first election of Executive Committee members was another incident that bothered me. The Socialist Workers Party/Y.S.A. leaders of our branch nominated each other. I nominated a newly recruited member. Then Paul, a member of the outgoing Executive Committee who had been renominated, gave a short speech about electing the most experienced, tried and true members. The fellow I nominated, by now thoroughly intimidated, withdrew from running.

On another occasion I went up to the Vanguard Bookstore in British Columbia with some other comrades to celebrate the anniversary of the Cuban Revolution with members of the League for Socialist Action, the Canadian counterpart of the S.W.P. I recall looking at their books and discovering pornography on their stalls. When I asked about it, I was told that it was necessary "in order to attract (presumably male) workers into the store." There was no talk at all of sexism in the organization when I belonged, and no one did anything to raise my consciousness on this issue. Again, this was an incident where I had a bad feeling, but I couldn't put it into words that could make sense even to myself.

I eventually joined the International Socialists, serving for a time on the Executive Committee of our branch. I attended a meeting of the I.S. National Committee in Oakland, California, because of my interest in the gay question. There I heard people who did not hesi-

feel like dirt, then degradation is the reality we favor. If we talk about human freedom, but in our actual behavior we try to encourage people to be dependent upon us, to look to our intelligence and activity to solve their problems, then in reality we encourage stupidity and weakness.

In 1966-67, I attended a talk given by a woman who is to this day still high up in the Spartacist League, a Trotskyist organization. Her actions and her speech were acutely mechanical, lifeless, and dull. After her speech she asked for questions. There was a long and uncomfortable silence.

Finally one fellow asked, "How long did it take you to prepare that speech?" None of us could believe that she had spent the last several days preparing a talk delivered and written as though the last thing she ever wanted to do was to actually communicate with us. Later that night--or the next day, I can't recall which--there was a party held to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. A couple of workers--real, live workers!--also somehow ended up at the party. Their good-natured but reactionary sentiments immediately brought the same woman who had given the horrid speech to her feet, shrieking that they had been duped.

Perhaps it was the alcohol that allowed her to loosen up a bit. The point is that she belongs to and was high up in an organization in which she was very well-read and totally alienated. Given what was probably one of her few contacts with real working class people, all she could do was shout at them. Freedom is worthy of itself, but here was a concrete instance of one person, at least, who not only could have been happier, but also more politically effective, if her organization and the people she worked with served real human needs--not some abstract trigonometry of doctrinal purity in Trotskyist Heaven. What working people would want to join or identify with such organizations?

It was as a member of the Executive Committee(!) of the International Socialists' Seattle branch that I finally realized the utter futility of trying to achieve fundamental change that didn't reach into and profoundly affect the shape and quality of individual

ipulative view of people characteristic of Leninism. A party or organization is only capable of building a liberated world, a world without repression and oppression, if its members undergo transformation themselves. The dichotomy between personal and political life is a false one, save to indicate two aspects of one vital process.

Some years later, I had occasion to attend a beer drinking party with some friends at a home near Ft. Lewis, Wn. What I wasn't aware of was that several people I didn't know were members of the Revolutionary Union (RU), a Maoist organization. When I made sarcastic remarks about Mao, China and Stalin, I was quickly told by the RUer's to shut up, in no uncertain terms. Later, all through the course of the evening, I was repeatedly threatened indirectly with several varieties of violence, by the RUer's and by one of their political contacts who had earlier told me that "Charles Manson was misunderstood."

"The humorless, thin-lipped soldiers of the 'vanguard'..."

Other people have not been as fortunate as I, in only being threatened with violence by the humorless, thin-lipped soldiers of the "vanguard" parties. I read recently of several different incidents where members of the Young Workers Liberation League (youth group of the Communist Party) had assaulted and beaten members of rival political tendencies.

The point of the foregoing examples is not simply to highlight the fact that various leftist tendencies deal with criticism and disagreement with various gangster methods. The larger significance is that their behavior today prefigures, in lesser degree, what their behavior would be tomorrow, when and if they were to gain any real power. Leninist organizations employ relatively mild methods for silencing dissent when they have little or no power in the society at large. Provided with an opportunity to rule, to be at the center of power, their methods have proved consistently less restrained in situations where they were ascendant.

What is of primary importance is not what we say, but what we do. If we talk about human dignity and everywhere around us in our daily lives we make people



tate for a moment to say that it was bad for women to be submissive and passive and men to be dominant, tell me and others in arguments that the organization should not officially take the stand that "Gay Is Good," because questions of sexuality are personal, not a proper subject of consideration for a political organization, and the organization had no business saying what was good and/or bad sex. I was told that—apparently unlike all other aspects of human behavior—sex was not the proper interest of a revolutionary socialist organization.

Today, several years later, I can look back upon all of these experiences and see a common thread. They are, at root, the expression of two things: 1) a formalistic separation of the personal from the political, and 2) the abstraction—and subsequent obstruction—of revolutionary struggle.

In point of fact, if revolution is not personal then it is nonexistent, be-

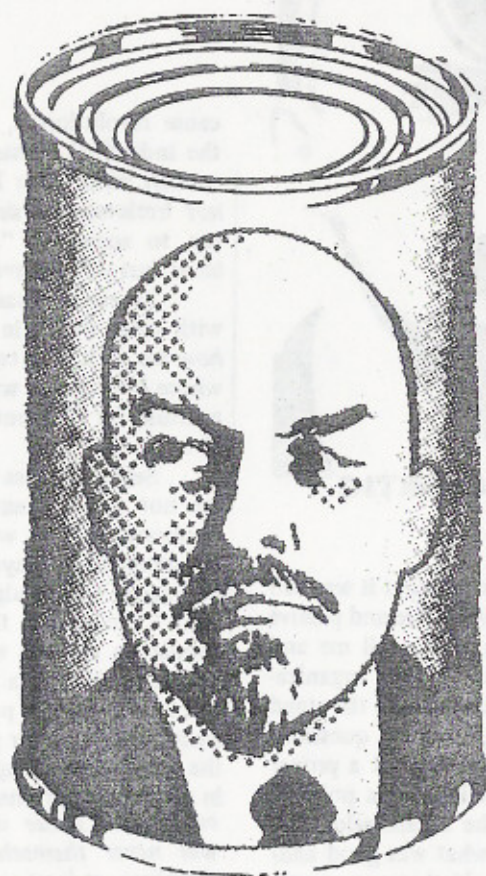
cause revolution is, finally, for and by the individual human being, working in concert with other human beings. It is not irrelevant or simply slanderous to say to someone, "I agree with your ideas, but you behave like a Stalin."

Liberation has everything to do with what we do in our daily lives and how we do it. The two leaders of Y.S.A. whose little girl is wretched are creating a future far different from the one they give lip-service to.

Self-awareness and self-knowledge are not unimportant, nor can they be dismissed by the words of a haughty theoretician as "psychologism," "petty bourgeois self-indulgence," or "mysticism." The fact is that there are many people on the left who are drawn into radical politics by a desire to cover over or compensate for personal/social problems by striving for power, which is not the same as working for liberation, for in seeking power, they walk all over other people. *Those who oppress others will never themselves be free.* It is, therefore, at least as important for us to be aware of and sensitive to our motives, feelings, and reactions as it is to be able to verbalize and understand the most current exposition of Marxism or other revolutionary ideas.

If people concerned for fundamental social change cannot even speak to each other in non-oppressive, non-intimidating ways, then "revolution" will remain simply a struggle to see who has power. And power—as history has woefully shown us—does not equal liberation.

57 VARIETIES



All unfit for human consumption

(Adapted from Black and Red Outlook)

broke off all relations with it, the resultant barrage of criticism aimed at YSA by women's and gay organizations all over the country threatened to throw a wrench into YSA's projected entry into women's organizations, and the issue of gay exclusion threatened to become an issue on the floor of the upcoming YSA convention. Consequently the line was abruptly changed--from above. There was no rank and file decision, because important decisions are not made by the rank and file in YSA. The leaders of YSA did not admit that they had ever been in error--the line simply changed, garbed in suitably rhetorical language about "changes in objective historical conditions."

It is important to understand that the sort of garbage that I have been describing is characteristic not just of the YSA/SWP, but of all the Leninist and social-democratic organizations, in varying degrees and in different ways. The dishonesty, manipulation, insensitivity and opportunism of "vanguard" parties flows directly from their ideology, which is based on the elect leading the relatively mindless mass, in order to change the external features of social organization. The corruption that lies at the heart of Leninist practice flows from the mechanical and man-





Ex-Stalin Square
in Budapest,
October 23rd, 1966

not appropriate to say anything about one YSAer's abominable treatment of his wife--that's "personal" (when I was in YSA there was no mention of sexism--this concept was too advanced for the "vanguard" party. In fact the Vanguard Bookstore in Vancouver, B. C. had pornography on its shelves next to Lenin and Trotsky. The reason? "To attract workers into the store.") When I later told one of my comrades that I found it alienating to be in YSA he stared blankly and said he didn't understand what I meant. At various times he talked about the alienating effects of capitalism in taking from the worker his/her product, and actually turning it against him/her. But my comrade couldn't understand it when I told him that my product--political work--was being used in an alienating way: to reinforce the power and prestige of the "tops." For him oppression could only exist "out there." The needs, the hopes, the fears of the individual were valid and real only when they related to recruiting new members, selling newspapers--doing the work of building the organization.

There were other things kept concealed from the membership. I once asked in all innocence why the YSA didn't try to organize homosexual people to the organization. Motivated by a naive but heartfelt notion that the YSA ought to welcome all oppressed people to its ranks, I wasn't aware of YSA's policy of exclusion of gay people, nor of its history of expelling comrades publicly exposed as gay. My comrade Jon Britton did nothing to enlighten me about these matters; he sympathized, but "We can't recruit them because it would turn off the workers."

It was several years later that I, along with the Gay Liberation Front in Seattle, learned of this policy. When the GLF formally denounced the YSA's sexism and

LETTER TO SRAF

While we're all striving to bring about major change in the institutions that've conditioned us, we want there to be some qualitative transformation in our lives. Not only do we desire to change the world around us, but we feel the urge for change--for liberation--in the value of personal daily existence.

We know that the two are really one, for there's no society apart from the "internal" life of people. Just as it's true that our lives are the product of the many institutions that have shaped us, so it's also true that those institutions are the product and reflection of what we are. We affirm the need for revolutionary change in our institutions because we see that they are fundamentally destructive to human freedom and happiness. We see the need for revolutionary change in our lives because we too are flawed and feel the urge to break out of the inward bonds that restrain and deform us.

Therefore, we view this process as dialectical: at once both one and not one. For there to be viable change, it must be total and comprehensive; and that means it must be both inward and outward.

To facilitate our growth away from sexism, away from racism, away from fear, we need to be sure that the organizational and institutional forms we create encourage democracy, freedom, and collective action based upon personal development. The institutions we create and in which we function determine to a great extent the quality of our perceptions and our ability to ascertain what is real and important, as opposed to what is illusory.

Since August 1965, I've been a member of and cooperated with an entire host of organizations holding to various ideologies and engaged in different projects.

I've experienced, since that time, a wide range of ideas and actions that have been destructive to the values of life, the values of liberation. This is a selected account of only a few of these experiences, designed to enhance our awareness of what promotes human freedom and what retards it. I've encountered many, many people who unthinkingly marry, adopt standard male/female roles and whose children are growing up to be unhappy and wretched people. We all know of such instances. Accordingly, as valid as such examples are, I've chosen to describe various personal anecdotes of a bit different character.

In late 1966, I joined the Young Socialist Alliance, the Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist youth affiliate of the Socialist Worker's Party. I was recruited at a party in Seattle which was attended by people representing various political tendencies. I became involved in a discussion about Cuba with one fellow and rapidly found myself arguing with four or five people. I was hesitant about responding to the recruiting pitch given to me, but agreed to join after I was told, "If you find you disagree, you can always quit later."

My being cajoled into joining YSA without having any over-all grasp of the politics and policies of the organization, I've since found, is widely character-

The REAL truth of Leninism was revealed when we slaughtered the Kronstadt Soviet and the Anarchist-Communist peasants of the Ukraine in 1921.

Yet fifty years later our faithful followers continue the alienating hierarchy within their own organization and the corresponding manipulative practice: "leading" the masses. They only reinforce (by presenting a false form of opposition) the capitalist system which still reigns everywhere.



istic of the level of YSA recruitment. Since the object of YSA is to build its organization and provide new members for its parent body--SWP--and not primarily to develop the independent, critical capabilities of people who are receptive to radical ideas, it is important that new members "understand enough, but not too much."

This manipulative attitude of the dual member YSA/SWPer's who dominate the YSA probably underlay other things that I discovered later. For instance, the YSA constitution--mentioned to me before I joined--was never produced to me or anyone I knew in our branch, although I repeatedly asked about it and was told it would be forthcoming. It is incredible to think that an organization such as YSA, which gave all manner of lip-service to internal democracy, did not even provide its members with copies of the organizational set-up and rules, whereby the reins of power would be clearly outlined. But then I discovered, with time, that there is nothing particularly democratic about YSA, since the last several oppositional tendencies within the organization have been expelled.

While I was a member of YSA, I learned something I later was to find characteristic of most "revolutionary" political theory and especially practice: a clear line exists between personal life and political activity, being validly crossed only when the former adversely affects the latter. Accordingly, it was